

## THE PERFECT MURDER

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One evening in November two brothers were seated in a little *café* in the Rue de la Roquette discussing murders. The evening papers lay in front of them, and they all contained a lurid account of a shocking affair in the Landes district, where a charcoal-burner had killed his wife and two children with a hatchet. From discussing this murder in particular they went on to discussing murder in general.

"I've never yet read a murder case without being impressed by the extraordinary clumsiness of it," remarked Paul, the younger brother. "Here's this fellow murders his victims with his own hatchet, leaves his hat behind in the shed, and arrives at a village hard by with blood on his boots."

"They lose their heads," said Henri, the elder. "In cases like that they are mentally unbalanced, hardly responsible for their actions."

"Yes," replied Paul, "but what impresses me is—what a lot of murders must be done by people who take trouble, who leave not a trace behind."

Henri shrugged his shoulders. "I shouldn't think it was so easy, old boy; there's always something that crops up."

"Nonsense! I'll guarantee there are thousands done every year. If you are living with anyone, for instance, it must be the easiest thing in the world to murder them."

"How?"

"Oh, some kind of accident—and then you go screaming into the street, 'Oh, my poor wife! Help!' You burst into tears, and everyone consoles you. I read of a woman somewhere who murdered her husband by leaving the window near the bed open at night when he was suffering from pneumonia. Who's going to suspect a case like that? Instead of that, people must always select revolvers, or knives, or go and buy poison at the chemist's across the way."

"It sounds as though you were contemplating a murder yourself," laughed Henri.

"Well, you never know," answered Paul; "circumstances might arise when a murder would be the only way out of a difficulty. If ever my time comes I shall take a lot of trouble about it. I promise you I shall leave no trace behind."

As Henri glanced at his brother making this remark he was struck by the fact that there was indeed nothing irreconcilable between the idea of a murder and the idea of Paul doing it. He was a big, saturnine-looking gentleman with a sallow, dissolute face, framed in a black square beard and swathes of untidy gray hair. His profession was that of a traveler in cheap jewelry, and his business dealings were not always of the straightest. Henri shuddered. With his own puny physique, bad health, and vacillating will, he was always dominated by his younger brother. He himself was a clerk in a drapery store, and he had a wife and three children. Paul was unmarried.

The brothers saw a good deal of each other, and were very intimate. But the word friendship would be an extravagant term to apply to their relationship. They were both always hard up, and they borrowed money from each other when every other source failed.

They had no other relatives except a very old uncle and aunt who lived at Chantilly. This uncle and aunt, whose name was Taillandier, were fairly well off, but they would have little to do with the two nephews. They were occasionally invited there to dinner, but neither Paul nor Henri ever succeeded in extracting a franc out of Uncle Robert. He was a very religious man, hard-fisted, cantankerous, and intolerant. His wife was a little more pliable. She was in effect an eccentric. She had spasms of generosity, during which periods both the brothers had at times



managed to get money out of her. But these were rare occasions. Moreover, the old man kept her so short of cash that she found it difficult to help her nephews even if she desired to.

As stated, the discussion between the two brothers occurred in November. It was presumably forgotten by both of them immediately afterwards. And indeed there is no reason to believe that it would ever have recurred, except for certain events which followed the sudden death of Uncle Robert in the February of the following year.

In the meantime the affairs of both Paul and Henri had gone disastrously. Paul had been detected in a dishonest transaction over a paste trinket, and had just been released from a period of imprisonment. The knowledge of this had not reached his uncle before his death. Henri's wife had had another baby, and had been very ill. He was more in debt than ever.

The news of the uncle's death came as a gleam of hope in the darkness of despair. What kind of will had he left? Knowing their uncle, each was convinced that, however it was framed, there was likely to be little or nothing for them. However, the old villain might have left them a thousand or two. And in any case, if the money was all left to the wife, here was a possible field of plunder. It need hardly be said that they repaired with all haste to the funeral, and even with greater alacrity to the lawyer's reading of the will.

The will contained surprises both encouraging and discouraging. In the first place the old man left a considerably larger fortune than anyone could have anticipated. In the second place all the money and securities were carefully tied up, and placed under the control of trustees. There were large bequests to religious charities, whilst the residue was held in trust for his wife. But so far as the brothers were concerned the surprise came at the end. On her death this residue was still to be held in trust, but a portion of the interest was to be divided between Henri and Paul, and on their death to go to the Church. The old man had recognized a certain call of the blood after all!

They both behaved with tact and discretion at the funeral, and were extremely sympathetic and solicitous towards Aunt Rosalie, who was too absorbed with her own trouble to take much notice of them. It was only when it came to the reading of the will that their avidity and interest outraged perhaps the strict canons



of good taste. It was Paul who managed to get it clear from the notary what the exact amount would probably be. Making allowances for fluctuations, accidents, and acts of God, on the death of Mme Taillandier the two brothers would inherit something between eight and ten thousand francs a year each. She was now eighty-two and very frail.

The brothers celebrated the good news with a carouse up in Montmartre. Naturally their chief topic of conversation was how long the old bird would keep on her perch. In any case, it could not be many years. With any luck it might be only a few weeks. The fortune seemed blinding. It would mean comfort and security to the end of their days. The rejoicings were mixed with recriminations against the old man for his stinginess. Why couldn't he have left them a lump sum down now? Why did he want to waste all this good gold on the Church? Why all this trustee business?

There was little they could do but await developments. Except that in the meantime—after a decent interval—they might try and touch the old lady for a bit. They parted, and the next day set about their business in cheerier spirits.

For a time they were extremely tactful. They made formal calls on Aunt Rosalie, inquiring after her health, and offering their services in any capacity whatsoever. But at the end of a month Henri called hurriedly one morning, and after the usual professions of solicitude asked his aunt if she could possibly lend him one hundred and twenty francs to pay the doctor who had attended his wife and baby. She lent him forty, grumbling at his foolishness at having children he could not afford to keep. A week later came Paul with a story about being robbed by a client. He wanted a hundred. She lent him ten.

When these appeals had been repeated three or four times, and received similar treatment—and sometimes no treatment at all—the old lady began to get annoyed. She was becoming more and more eccentric. She now had a companion, an angular, middle-aged woman named Mme Chavanne, who appeared like a protecting goddess. Sometimes when the brothers called Mme Chavanne would say that Mme Taillandier was too unwell to see anyone. If this news had been true it would have been good news indeed, but the brothers suspected that it was all pre-



arranged. Two years went by, and they both began to despair.

"She may live to a hundred," said Paul.

"We shall die of old age first," grumbled Henri.

It was difficult to borrow money on the strength of the will. In the first place their friends were more of the borrowing than the lending class. And anyone who had a little was suspicious of the story, and wanted all kinds of securities. It was Paul who first thought of going to an insurance company to try to raise money on the reversionary interest. They did succeed in the end, in getting an insurance company to advance them two thousand francs each, but the negotiations took five months to complete, and by the time they had insured their lives, paid the lawyer's fees and paid for the various deeds and stamps, and signed some thirty or forty forms, each man only received a little over a thousand francs, which was quickly lost in paying accrued debts and squandering the remainder. Their hopes were raised by the dismissal of Mme Chavanne, only to be lowered again by the arrival of an even more aggressive companion. The companions came and went with startling rapidity. None of them could stand for any time the old lady's eccentricity and ill-temper. The whole of the staff was always being changed. The only one who remained loyal all through was the portly cook, Ernestine. Even this may have been due to the fact that she never came in touch with her mistress. She was an excellent cook, and she never moved from the kitchen. Moreover, the cooking required by Mme Taillandier was of the simplest nature, and she seldom entertained. And she hardly ever left her apartment. Any complaints that were made were made through the housekeeper, and the complaints and their retaliations became mellowed in the process; for Ernestine also had a temper of her own.

Nearly another year passed before what appeared to Paul to be a mild stroke of good fortune came his way. Things had been going from bad to worse. Neither of the brothers was in a position to lend a sou to the other. Henri's family was becoming a greater drag and people were not buying Paul's trinkets.

One day, during an interview with his aunt—he had been trying to borrow more money—he fainted in her presence. It is difficult to know what it was about this act which affected the old lady, but she ordered him to be put to bed in one of the rooms of



the villa. Possibly she jumped to the conclusion that he had fainted from lack of food—which was not true—Paul never went without food and drink—and she suddenly realized that after all he was her husband's sister's son. He must certainly have looked pathetic, this white-faced man, well past middle age, and broken in life. Whatever it was, she showed a broad streak of compassion for him. She ordered her servants to look after him, and to allow him to remain until she countermanded the order.

Paul, who had certainly felt faint, but quickly seized the occasion to make it as dramatic as possible, saw in this an opportunity to wheedle his way into his aunt's favors. His behavior was exemplary. The next morning, looking very white and shaky, he visited her, and asked her to allow him to go, as he had no idea of abusing her hospitality. If he had taken up the opposite attitude she would probably have turned him out, but because he suggested going she ordered him to stop. During the daytime he went about his dubious business, but he continued to return there at night to sleep, and to enjoy a good dinner cooked by the admirable Ernestine. He was in clover.

Henri was naturally envious when he heard of his brother's good fortune. And Paul was fearful that Henri would spoil the whole game by going and throwing a fit himself in the presence of the aunt. But this, of course, would have been too obvious and foolish for even Henri to consider seriously. And he racked his brains for some means of inveigling the old lady. Every plan he put forth, however, Paul sat upon. He was quite comfortable himself, and he didn't see the point of his brother butting in.

"Besides," he said, "she may turn me out any day. Then you can have your shot."

They quarreled about this, and did not see each other for some time. One would have thought that Henri's appeal to Mme Taillandier would have been stronger than Paul's. He was a struggling individual, with a wife and four children. Paul was a notorious ne'er-do-well, and he had no attachments. Nevertheless the old lady continued to support Paul. Perhaps it was because he was a big man, and she liked big men. Her husband had been a man of fine physique. Henri was puny, and she despised him. She had never had children of her own, and she disliked children. She was always upbraiding Henri and his wife for their fecundity. Any attempt to pander to her emotions



through the sentiment of childhood failed. She would not have the children in her house. And any small acts of charity which she bestowed upon them seemed to be done more with the idea of giving her an opportunity to inflict her sarcasm and venom upon them than out of kindness of heart.

In Paul, on the other hand, she seemed to find something slightly attractive. She sometimes sent for him, and he, all agog—expecting to get his notice to quit—would be agreeably surprised to find that, on the contrary, she had some little commission she wished him to execute. And you may rest assured that he never failed to make a few francs out of all these occasions. The notice to quit did not come. It may be—poor deluded woman!—that she regarded him as some kind of protection. He was in any case the only “man” who slept under her roof.

At first she seldom spoke to him, but as time went on she would sometimes send for him to relieve her loneliness. Nothing could have been more ingratiating than Paul’s manners in these circumstances. He talked expansively about politics, knowing beforehand his aunt’s views, and just what she would like him to say. Her eyesight was very bad, and he would read her the news of the day, and tell her what was happening in Paris. He humored her every whim. He was astute enough to see that it would be foolish and dangerous to attempt to borrow money for the moment. He was biding his time, and trying to think out the most profitable plan of campaign. There was no immediate hurry. His bed was comfortable, and Ernestine’s cooking was excellent.

In another year’s time he had established himself as quite one of the permanent household. He was consulted about the servants, and the doctors, and the management of the house, everything except the control of money, which was jealously guarded by a firm of lawyers. Many a time he would curse his uncle’s foresight. The old man’s spirit seemed to be hovering in the dim recesses of the overcrowded rooms, mocking him. For the old lady, eccentric and foolish in many ways, kept a strict check upon her dividends. It was her absorbing interest in life, that and an old gray perroquet, which she treated like a child. Its name was Anna, and it used to walk up and down her table at meal-times and feed off her own plate. Finding himself so firmly



intrenched Paul's assurance gradually increased. He began to treat his aunt as an equal, and sometimes even to contradict her, and she did not seem to resent it.

In the meantime Henri was eating his heart out with jealousy and sullen rage. The whole thing was unfair. He occasionally saw Paul, who boasted openly of his strong position in the Taillandier household, and he would not believe that Paul was not getting money out of the old lady as well as board and lodging. With no additional expenses Paul was better dressed than he used to be, and he looked fatter and better in health. All—or nearly all—of Henri's appeals, although pitched in a most pathetic key, were rebuffed. He felt a bitter hatred against his aunt, his brother, and life in general. If only she would die! What was the good of life to a woman at eighty-five or six? And there was he—four young children, clamoring for food, and clothes, and the ordinary decent comforts. And there was Paul, idling his days away at *cafés* and his nights at cabarets—nothing to do, and no responsibilities.

Meeting Paul one day he said:

"I say, old boy, couldn't you spring me a hundred francs? I haven't the money to pay my rent next week."

"She gives me nothing," replied Paul.

Henri did not believe this, but it would be undiplomatic to quarrel. He said:

"Aren't there—isn't there some little thing lying about the villa you could slip in your pocket? We could sell it, see? Go shares. I'm desperately pushed."

Paul looked down his nose. Name of a pig! did Henri think he had never thought of that? Many and many a time the temptation had come to him. But no; every few months people came from the lawyer's office, and the inventory of the whole household was checked. The servants could not be suspected. They were not selected without irreproachable characters. If he were suspected—well, all kinds of unpleasant things might crop up. Oh, no, he was too well off where he was. The game was to lie in wait. The old lady simply must die soon. She had even been complaining of her chest that morning. She was always playing with the perroquet. Somehow this bird got on Paul's nerves. He wanted to wring its neck. He imitated the way she would say: "There's a pretty lady! Oh, my sweet! Another nice grape for



my little one. There's a pretty lady!" He told Henri all about this, and the elder brother went on his way with a grunt that only conveyed doubt and suspicion.

In view of this position it seemed strange that in the end it was Paul who was directly responsible for the *dénouement* in the Taillandier household. His success went to his rather weak head like wine. He began to swagger and bluster and abuse his aunt's hospitality. And, curiously enough, the more he advanced the further she withdrew. The eccentric old lady seemed to be losing her powers of resistance so far as he was concerned. And he began to borrow small sums of money from her, and, as she acquiesced so readily, to increase his demands. He let his traveling business go, and sometimes he would get lost for days at a time. He would spend his time at the races, and drinking with doubtful acquaintances in obscure *cafés*. Sometimes he won, but in the majority of cases he lost. He ran up bills and got into debt. By cajoling small sums out of his aunt he kept his debtors at bay for nearly nine months.

But one evening he came to see Henri in a great state of distress. His face, which had taken on a healthier glow when he first went to live with his aunt, had become puffy and livid. His eyes were bloodshot.

"Old boy," he said, "I'm at my wit's end. I've got to find seven thousand francs by the twenty-first of the month, or they're going to foreclose. How do you stand? I'll pay you back."

To try to borrow money from Henri was like appealing to the desert for a cooling draft. He also had to find money by the twenty-first, and he was overdrawn at the bank. They exchanged confidences, and in their mutual distress they felt sorry for each other and for themselves. It was a November evening, and the rain was driving along the boulevards in fitful gusts. After trudging a long way they turned into a little *café* in the Rue de la Roquette, and sat down and ordered two cognacs. The *café* was almost deserted. A few men in mackintoshes were scattered around reading the evening papers. They sat at a marble table in the corner and tried to think of ways and means. But after a time a silence fell between them. There seemed nothing more to suggest. They could hear the rain beating on the skylight. An old man four tables away was poring over *La Patrie*.



Suddenly Henri looked furtively around the room and clutched his brother's arm.

"Paul!" he whispered.

"What is it?"

"Do you remember—it has all come back to me—suddenly—one night, a night something like this—it must be five or six years ago—we were seated here in this same *café*—do you remember?"

"No. I don't remember. What was it?"

"It was the night of that murder in the Landes district. We got talking about—don't you remember?"

Paul scratched his temple and sipped the cognac. Henri leant closer to him.

"You said—you said that if you lived with anyone, it was the easiest thing in the world to murder them. An accident, you know. And you go screaming into the street——"

Paul started, and stared at his brother, who continued:

"You said that if ever you—you had to do it, you would guarantee that you would take every trouble. You wouldn't leave a trace behind."

Paul was acting. He pretended to half remember, to half understand. But his eyes narrowed. Imbecile! Hadn't he been through it all in imagination a hundred times? Hadn't he already been planning and scheming an act for which his brother would reap half the benefit? Nevertheless he was staggered. He never imagined that the suggestion would come from Henri. He was secretly relieved. If Henri was to receive half the benefit, let him also share half the responsibilities. The risk in any case would be wholly his. He grinned enigmatically, and they put their heads together. And so in that dim corner of the *café* was planned the perfect murder.

Coming up against the actual proposition, Paul had long since realized that the affair was not so easy of accomplishment as he had so airily suggested. For the thing must be done without violence, without clues, without trace. Such ideas as leaving the window open at night were out of the question, as the companion slept in the same room. Moreover, the old lady was quite capable of getting out of bed and shutting it herself if she felt a draft. Some kind of accident? Yes, but what? Suppose she slipped and broke her neck when Paul was in the room. It would



be altogether too suspicious. Besides, she would probably only partially break her neck. She would regain so recent consciousness to feel. To drown her in her bath? The door was always locked, or the companion hovering—said

"You've always got to remember," whispered Paul, "my suspicion falls on me, there's the motive. There's a strong motive why I should—it's got to be absolutely irrefragable. I don't care if some people do suspect afterwards—when we've got the money."

"What about her food?"

"The food is cooked by Ernestine, and the companion serves it. Besides, suppose I get a chance to tamper with the food, how am I going to get hold of—you know?"

"Weed-killer?"

"Yes, I should be in a pretty position if they traced the fact that I had bought weed-killer. You might buy some and let me have a little on the quiet."

Henri turned pale. "No, no; the motive applies to me too. They'd get us both."

When the two pleasant gentlemen parted at midnight their plans were still very immature, but they arranged to meet the following evening. It was the thirteenth of the month. To save the situation the deed must be accomplished within eight days. Of course they wouldn't get the money at once, but, knowing the circumstances, creditors would be willing to wait. When they met the following evening in the Café des Sentiers, Paul appeared flushed and excited, and Henri was pale and on edge. He hadn't slept. He wanted to wash the whole thing out.

"And sleep at your home, I suppose?" sneered Paul. "I sleep in my little cottage. I've got it. Don't distress yourself. You proposed this last night. I've been thinking about it and watching for months. Ernestine is a good cook, and very methodical. Oh, very methodical! She does everything every day in the same way, exactly to schedule. My apartment is on the same floor, so I can come to appreciate her painstaking exactness. The old woman eats sparingly and according to routine. One night she has fish. The next night she has a soufflé made with two eggs. Fish, soufflé, fish, soufflé, regular as the turn of a screw. Now listen. After lunch every day Ernestine washes up the plates and puts them away. After that she prepares roughly the evening meal. If it is a fish



night, she prepares the fish ready to pop into the pan. If it is a soufflé night, she beats up two eggs and puts them ready in a basin. Having done that, she changes her frock, powders her nose, and goes over to the convent to see her sister who is working there. She is away an hour and a half. She returns punctually at four o'clock. You could set your watch by her movements."

"Yes, but——"

"It is difficult to insert what I propose in fish, but I don't see any difficulty in dropping it into two beaten-up eggs, and giving an extra twist to the egg-whisk, or whatever they call it."

Henri's face was quite gray.

"But—but—Paul, how are you going to get hold of the—poison?"

"Who said anything about poison?"

"Well, but what?"

"That's were *you* come in."

"I!"

"Yes, you're in it too, aren't you? You get half the spoils, don't you? Why shouldn't you—some time to-morrow when your wife's out——"

"What?"

"Just grind up a piece of glass."

"Glass!"

"Yes, you've heard of glass, haven't you? An ordinary piece of broken wineglass will do. Grind it up as fine as a powder, the finer the better, the finer the more—effective."

Henri gasped. No, no, he couldn't do this thing. Very well, then; if he was such a coward Paul would have to do it himself. And perhaps when the time came Henri would also be too frightened to draw his dividends. Perhaps he would like to make them over to his dear brother Paul? Come, it was only a little thing to do. Eight days to the twenty-first. To-morrow, fish day, but Wednesday would be soufflé. So easy, so untraceable, so safe.

"But you," whined Henri, "they will suspect you."

"Even if they do they can prove nothing. But in order to avoid this unpleasantness I propose to leave home soon after breakfast. I shall return at a quarter-past three, letting myself in through the stable yard. The stables, as you know, are not used. There is no one else on that floor. Ernestine is upstairs. She only comes down to answer the front-door bell. I shall be in and out



of the house within five minutes, and I should return to bed at night, when perhaps—I may be too late to render assistance.

Henri was terribly agitated. On one hand was just murder, a thing he had never connected himself with in his life. On the other hand was comfort for himself and his family, an experience he had given up hoping for. It was in any case not exactly murder on his part. It was Paul's murder. At the same time, knowing all about it, being an accessory before the fact, it would seem contrary to all degree to put the whole onus on Paul. Grinding up a piece of glass was such a little thing. It couldn't possibly incriminate him. Nobody could ever prove that he'd done it. But it was a terrible step to take.

"Have another cognac, my little cabbage."

It was Paul's voice that woke Henri back to actuality. He said: "All right, yes, yes," but whether this referred to the cognac or to the act of grinding up a piece of glass he hardly knew himself.

From that moment to twenty-four hours later, when he handed over a white packet to his brother across the same table at the Cote des Sentiers, Henri seemed to be in a nightmarish dream. He had no recollection of how he had passed the time. He seemed to pass from that last cognac to this one, and the interval was a blank.

"Fish today, soufflé to-morrow," he heard Paul chuckling. "Brother, you have done your work well."

When Paul went he wanted to call after him to come back, but he was frightened of the sound of his own voice. He was terribly frightened. He went to bed very late and could not sleep. The next morning he awoke with a headache, and he got his wife to telegraph to the office to say that he was too ill to come. He lay in bed all day, visualizing over and over and over again the possible events of the evening.

Paul would be caught. Someone would catch him actually putting the powder into the eggs. He would be arrested. Paul would give him away. Why did Paul say it was so easy to murder anyone if you lived with them? It wasn't easy at all. The whole thing was chock-a-block with dangers and pitfalls. Putalls! At half past three he started up in bed. He had a vision of himself and Paul being gallotted side by side! He must stop it a



any cost. He began to get up. Then he realized that it was already too late. The deed had been done. Paul had said that he would be in and out of the house within five minutes at three-fifteen—a quarter of an hour ago! Where was Paul? Would he be coming to see him? He was going to spend the evening out somewhere, "returning late at night."

He dressed feverishly. There was still time. He could call at his aunt's. Rush down to the kitchen, seize the basin of beaten-up eggs, and throw them away. But where? how? By the time he got there Ernestine would have returned. She would want to know all about it. The egg mixture would be examined, analyzed. God in Heaven! it was too late! The thing would have to go on, and he suffer and wait.

Having dressed, he went out after saying to his wife:

"It's all right. It's going to be all right," not exactly knowing what he meant. He walked rapidly along the streets, with no fixed destination in his mind. He found himself in the *café* in the Rue de la Roquette, where the idea was first conceived, where he had reminded his brother.

He sat there drinking, waiting for the hours to pass.

Soufflé day, and the old lady dined at seven! It was now not quite five. He hoped Paul would turn up. A stranger tried to engage him in conversation. The stranger apparently had some grievance against a railway company. He wanted to tell him all the details about a contract for rivets, over which he had been disappointed. Henri didn't understand a word he was talking about. He didn't listen. He wanted the stranger to drop down dead, or vanish into thin air. At last he called the waiter and paid for his reckoning, indicated by a small pile of saucers. From there he walked rapidly to the *Café des Sentiers*, looking for Paul. He was not there. Six o'clock. One hour more. He could not keep still. He paid and went on again, calling at *café* after *café*. A quarter to seven. Pray God that she threw it away. Had he ground it fine enough?

Five minutes to seven. Seven o'clock. Now. He picked up his hat and went again. The brandy had gone to his head. At half-past seven he laughed recklessly. After all, what was the good of life to this old woman of eighty-six? He tried to convince himself that he had done it for the sake of his wife and children. He tried to concentrate on the future, how he could manage on



eight or ten thousand francs a year. He would give notice at the office, be rude to people who had been bullying him for years—that old blackguard Mocquin!

At ten o'clock he was drunk, torpid, and indifferent. The whole thing was over for good or ill. What did it matter? He terribly wanted to see Paul, but he was too tired to care very much. The irrevocable step had been taken. He went home to bed and fell into a heavy drunken sleep.

"Henri! Henri! Wake up! What is the matter with you?"

His wife was shaking him. He blinked his way into a partial condition of consciousness. November sunlight was pouring into the room.

"It's late, isn't it?" he said, involuntarily.

"It's past eight. You'll be late at the office. You didn't go yesterday. If you go on like this you'll get the sack, and then what shall we do?"

Slowly the recollection of last night's events came back to him.

"There's nothing to worry about," he said. "I'm too ill to go to-day. Send them another telegram. It'll be all right."

His wife looked at him searchingly. "You've been drinking," she said. "Oh, you men! God knows what will become of us."

She appeared to be weeping in her apron. It struck him forcibly at that instant how provoking and small women are. Here was Jeannette crying over her petty troubles. Whereas he—

The whole thing was becoming vivid again. Where was Paul? What had happened? Was it at all likely that he could go down to an office on a day like this, a day that was to decide his fate?

He groaned, and elaborated rather pathetically his imaginary ailments, anything to keep this woman quiet. She left him at last, and he lay there waiting for something to happen. The hours passed. What would be the first intimation? Paul or the gendarmes? Thoughts of the latter stirred him to a state of fevered activity. About midday he arose, dressed, and went out. He told his wife he was going to the office, but he had no intention of doing so. He went and drank coffee at a place up in the Marais. He was terrified of his old haunts. He wandered from place to place, uncertain how to act. Late in the afternoon he entered a *café* in the Rue Alibert. At a kiosk outside he bought a late edition of an afternoon newspaper. He sat down,



ordered a drink and opened the newspaper. He glanced at the central news page, and as his eye absorbed one paragraph he unconsciously uttered a low scream. The paragraph was as follows:

### MYSTERIOUS AFFAIR AT CHANTILLY

*A mysterious affair occurred at Chantilly this morning. A middle-aged man, named Paul Denoyel, complained of pains in the stomach after eating an omelette. He died soon after in great agony. He was staying with his aunt, Mme Taillandier. No other members of the household were affected. The matter is to be inquired into.*

The rest was a dream. He was only vaguely conscious of the events which followed. He wandered through it all, the instinct of self-preservation bidding him hold his tongue in all circumstances. He knew nothing. He had seen nothing. He had a visionary recollection of a plump, weeping Ernestine, at the inquest, enlarging upon the eccentricities of her mistress. A queer woman, who would brook no contradiction. He heard a lot about the fish day and the soufflé day, and how the old lady insisted that this was a fish day, and that she had had a soufflé the day before. You could not argue with her when she was like that. And Ernestine had beaten up the eggs all ready for the soufflé—most provoking! But Ernestine was a good cook, of method and economy. She wasted nothing. What should she do with the eggs? Why, of course, Mr. Paul, who since he had come to live there was never content with a *café complet*. He must have a breakfast, like these English and other foreigners do. She made him an omelette, which he ate heartily.

Then the beaten-up eggs with their deadly mixture were intended for Mme Taillandier? But who was responsible for this? Ernestine? But there was no motive here. Ernestine gained nothing by her mistress's death. Indeed she only stood to lose her situation. Motive? Was it possible that the deceased—The inquiry went on a long while. Henri himself was conscious of being in the witness-box. He knew nothing. He couldn't understand it. His brother would not be likely to do that. He himself was prostrate with grief. He loved his brother.



There was nothing to do but return an open verdict. Shadowy figures passed before his mind's eye—shadowy figures and shadowy realizations. He had perfectly murdered his brother. The whole of the dividends of the estate would one day be his, and his wife's and children's. Eighteen thousand francs a year! One day——

One vision more vivid than the rest—the old lady on the day following the inquest, seated bolt upright at her table, like a figure of perpetuity, playing with the old gray perroquet, stroking its mangy neck.

"There's a pretty lady! Oh, my sweet! Another nice grape for my little one. There's a pretty lady!"